

Breaking Through the Glass Ceiling

The Critical Role of Sponsorship in Advancing
Women's Leadership in Higher Education

Based on Dissertation Research | Doctor of Student Affairs Leadership

The University of Georgia • 2026

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BACKGROUND

~30%

of senior leadership roles
in higher education held by women

2X

more barriers faced by
women of color vs. White women

70%+

of women lack a sponsor
throughout their careers

The Problem

1. Leadership scholarship has historically centered male perspectives, setting a masculine standard against which women leaders are assessed.
2. Women are disproportionately concentrated in lower-level, less authoritative positions compared to men across all sectors.
3. Three interconnected barriers impede women's advancement: systemic discrimination, lack of representation, and absence of sponsorship.
4. Women who do reach senior positions must often leave their organizations to advance, while male counterparts are promoted from within.
5. The problem is structural — embedded in organizational cultures, succession planning, and informal networks that exclude women.

RESEARCH PURPOSE & THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Study Purpose

To explore the unique challenges faced by women in higher education leadership as they progressed in their careers — with a particular focus on systemic barriers, the role of sponsorship, and strategies for advancement — ultimately providing support to women who aspire to senior-level positions.

Research Questions

- RQ1** What unique challenges do women leaders experience and encounter while advancing their careers in higher education?
- RQ2** What experiences of sexism, discrimination, and sponsorship did women leaders identify in their journey to advance?
- RQ3** How did women leaders in higher education overcome challenges and cope with difficulties while advancing their careers?

Feminist Leadership Theory

Theoretical Framework

Self-Definition

Women define their own leadership identities and resist externally imposed narratives and stereotypes.

Intersecting Barriers

Gender, race, class, and other identities combine to create compounded disadvantages for women.

Collective Empowerment

Advancing women's leadership requires structural change, not just individual resilience.

Barriers Facing Women in Higher Education Leadership

Systemic Discrimination

Sexism and gender bias embedded in institutional structures. Masculine leadership norms exclude women and limit access to senior roles.

Invisibility & Hypervisibility

Women are often overlooked for advancement while simultaneously scrutinized more harshly than male counterparts for every decision.

Lack of Representation

Women — especially women of color — remain underrepresented in senior leadership, limiting role models, mentors, and peer networks.

Absent Sponsorship

Career advancement requires sponsors who advocate in closed-door meetings. Women are significantly less likely than men to have sponsors.

THE GLASS CEILING IN HIGHER EDUCATION

"The glass ceiling symbolizes the wide range of barriers that hinder qualified women from advancing higher in their organizations — barriers unrelated to preparation, qualifications, or competence."

Masculine Leadership Norms

- Leadership has historically been defined by male behaviors and characteristics
- Women are evaluated against a male standard rather than their own merits
- Assertiveness in women is penalized; the same behavior in men is rewarded

Structural Exclusion

- Women are concentrated in lower-level and less authoritative positions
- Informal networks and "boys' clubs" bypass formal qualifications
- Succession planning frequently overlooks qualified women candidates

Psychological Burden

- Imposter syndrome is significantly higher among women in senior roles
- Women are held to double standards — doing more to prove the same worth
- Isolation at the top amplifies self-doubt and reduces leadership confidence

MENTORSHIP vs. SPONSORSHIP

MENTOR

- Provides emotional support and guidance
- Offers feedback and acts as a role model
- Helps navigate organizational politics
- Focuses on personal and professional development
- Relationship carries low reputational risk
- Does not expect reciprocal benefit
- Guides from the sidelines

SPONSOR

- Leverages power & influence for protégé's advancement
- Actively advocates in closed-door decision making
- Protects protégé from organizational barriers
- Connects protégé to influential networks
- Relationship carries reputational investment
- Expects loyalty and excellent performance in return
- Acts as an agent — not just an advisor

WHY SPONSORSHIP IS THE KEY FOR WOMEN'S ADVANCEMENT

"Sponsorship delivers high-octane advocacy — providing women with the space to develop potential, acquire new skills, and take risks. It is the most powerful tool for breaking through closed doors."

1

Increases Promotion

Research shows sponsorship significantly increases the likelihood of promotion for women and historically marginalized individuals in all sectors.

2

Breaks Structural Barriers

Sponsors use positional power to open doors that qualifications alone cannot unlock — countering systemic bias in hiring and promotion.

3

Builds Social Capital

Sponsorship creates influential connections and networking opportunities, providing women the social capital needed to advance into senior roles.

METHODOLOGY

Research Approach

- ▶ Qualitative research method
- ▶ Phenomenological narrative inquiry
- ▶ Transformative paradigm
- ▶ Guided by Feminist Leadership Theory

Data Collection

- ▶ Semistructured 60-minute interviews
- ▶ Recorded and transcribed sessions
- ▶ 11 questions across 4 sections
- ▶ Prescreen survey for eligibility

Participants

- ▶ Women leaders in senior/mid-level roles
- ▶ Variety of institution types
- ▶ Minimum 2 years leadership experience
- ▶ At least 10 years in higher education

Data Analysis

- ▶ Thematic analysis — in vivo coding
- ▶ Memo technique for reflexivity
- ▶ Member-checking with participants
- ▶ Triangulation for trustworthiness

Five Major Themes from Narrative Interviews

01 | RQ1

Ageism

Women in senior roles at a young age had their credibility, knowledge, and leadership regularly questioned — even when equally or more qualified than older counterparts.

02 | RQ1

Lack of Representation

Women were frequently the only female at decision-making tables, creating profound isolation and tokenism — bearing the weight of representing all women while managing executive responsibilities.

03 | RQ1

Imposter Syndrome

Isolation and absence of similar peers led women to internalize self-doubt, second-guessing their competence and right to occupy senior leadership roles.

04 | RQ2

Sexism & the Sponsorship Gap

Discrimination was subtle but persistent — decisions overruled, authority undermined. Critically, women had limited understanding of sponsorship and lacked sponsors in their career journeys.

05 | RQ3

Coping & Resilience

Women leaders relied on faith, strong support networks, therapy, professional organizations, and direct confrontation of microaggressions as survival and growth strategies.

VOICES FROM THE RESEARCH

“

A sponsor is someone that can basically put your name in rooms that you're not going to be in... A mentor is someone who you call often. A sponsor is someone that can actually open doors.

Senior Leader, Higher Education

“

Being a woman in leadership is a challenge by itself. You know, there's a tax for being a woman. There's a tax for being a minority. And those taxes compound.

Dean, College of Education

“

A sponsor is one that is literally responsible — they take on the responsibility of getting me positionally to where I need to go through their connections and influence.

Dean, Academic Center of Excellence

“

I don't think I've ever really considered the difference between a sponsor and a mentor. I wouldn't even say I have any sponsors. I've only ever pursued mentors.

Vice President of Enrollment

FROM GLASS TO CONCRETE CEILING

While a glass ceiling can eventually be broken, women — especially women of color — face a "concrete ceiling" reinforced by the intersection of multiple forms of discrimination, creating barriers that are not merely invisible but structurally impenetrable without intentional intervention.

"If you can see it, you can achieve it — but the concrete ceiling blocks even the view."

Discussion Highlights

Ageism was the most reported barrier — young women had their credibility and contributions systematically dismissed regardless of qualifications.

Imposter syndrome intensified when women were the only female at the table, with no peers to affirm their belonging or share their experience.

Sexism and gender bias manifested through undermined authority, bypassed decisions, and blocked opportunities — not overt discrimination.

The most critical finding: women had limited understanding of sponsorship and lacked sponsors — severely limiting their career advancement.

Despite significant barriers, women developed resilience through faith, support networks, professional communities, and advocacy strategies.

RECOMMENDATIONS

FOR WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP

- Understand the critical difference between mentors and sponsors — and actively seek both.
- Invest energy in identifying and cultivating sponsor relationships early in your career.
- Anticipate and prepare mentally for ageism, tokenism, and imposter syndrome challenges.
- Build robust support systems: mentors, peers, therapists, communities, and professional networks.
- Develop strategic judgment about when to confront bias vs. when to conserve energy.
- Seek out leadership development programs focused on sponsorship and career advancement.

FOR INSTITUTIONS

- Create formal sponsorship programs pairing senior leaders with women administrators.
- Train leaders on the distinction between mentorship and sponsorship — and their role as sponsors.
- Address the concrete ceiling through structural policy change, not just diversity initiatives.
- Examine succession planning for gender bias; create transparent pathways to promotion.
- Provide institutional support for well-being programs and leadership coaching.
- Increase women's representation in senior leadership as an equity imperative, not a gesture.

CONCLUSION

The Path Forward for Women in Leadership

Women in higher education face a concrete ceiling — not merely a glass one — reinforced by gender bias, systemic exclusion, and masculine leadership norms embedded in institutional structures.

Sponsorship is not a luxury; it is a career necessity. The gap between mentorship and sponsorship is one of the most critical and underaddressed barriers to women's advancement in leadership.

Institutions must move beyond symbolic diversity efforts to create structural conditions where women can thrive — including formal sponsorship programs, equitable succession planning, and genuine representation.

The resilience women demonstrate is extraordinary — but resilience should not be the only strategy. Systemic change is essential so that extraordinary effort is no longer required simply to occupy a seat at the table.

Thank You

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Questions & Discussion Welcome